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Dahl Analyzes Intelligence Failures, Successes

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Dahl Analyzes Intelligence Failures, Successes

Center for Homeland Defense and Security faculty member Erik Dahl has a startling assessment of intelligence practice in the United States for the past half century.

"We have misunderstood why intelligence fails for the past 50 years," Dahl said during an interview in his office at Glasgow Hall on the NPS campus. "My major finding is that our conventional understanding about intelligence failure is wrong."

Dahl's book, "Intelligence and Surprise Attack," was released by Georgetown University Press in July. The book studies intelligence failures from Pearl Harbor through the Sept. 11 attacks, and in it Dahl combines his 21-year career as a Navy intelligence officer with his academic research that began as a doctoral student at Tufts University in order to reach a conclusion that challenges the conventional wisdom.

While many experts contend intelligence failures stem from insufficient analysis, Dahl believes the problem instead lies with failures of intelligence collection. Part of the basis of his research is reflected in a lesson that was drilled into him early in his career as an intelligence officer: Strive to replicate the intelligence success of the victory in the Battle of Midway during World War II, while avoiding the failure of Pearl Harbor.

"The difference between Midway and Pearl Harbor wasn't better analysis, but better collection and the presence of decision makers and military commanders who were receptive to the warnings they received from intelligence," Dahl observed.

The 9/11 attacks and the more recent Boston Marathon bombers are two examples in which the conventional intelligence wisdom is that faulty analysis is to blame. The 9/11 Commission famously called the failure to prevent it a failure of imagination. And even in Boston there was intelligence suggesting some form of attack that eventually did happen, suggesting that the failure resulted because analysts were unable to "connect the dots."

But Dahl disagrees, arguing that "To prevent disaster and future terrorist attacks we need to improve our intelligence collection. We need to collect more dots, not just connect them."

Another lesson from his research also roils traditional perception: Strategic surprises and disasters occur not only when least expected, but often when and where they are most expected. Even before the Boston Marathon bombings, the local intelligence fusion center in Boston, according to press reports, had warned of the use of an improvised explosive device at the finish line, Dahl noted, re-emphasizing the need to more rigorously collect specific, tactical-level intelligence needed to prevent disasters.

And to collect more dots, Dahl raises the controversial prospect of gathering intelligence within the United States. Coming on the heels of this year's revelations about the NSA's spying program, he acknowledges the politically prickly debate, but insists it is a necessary one.

That raises important questions about the balance between civil liberties and security, and I think we're only now starting to have a real, informed debate about that in this country after the NSA leaks," he said.

In any intelligence effort, he said, whether it's trying to stop a terrorist attack or finding Osama bin Laden, the process begins with a broad search compiling voluminous information--most of which is not useful, but can be stored away and meticulously perused should the need arise. His research suggests, however, that what really foils domestic plots is the "big data" that is evidently being collected by the NSA, but rather "little data." This sort of lower-level, specific information can lead to actionable intelligence, which can then be coupled with what he calls "old fashioned law enforcement techniques," such as undercover police officers, informants, and tips from the public.

The New York Police Department is the best known example of using such programs and is considered the "gold standard" for domestic intelligence and counterterrorism, Dahl noted. But the NYPD program is also quite controversial.

"Many Americans might be more comfortable with intelligence being gathered this way, at the local level, but the controversy surrounding the NYPD's programs suggests there is no easy way to keep America safe, and no easy way where to locate that balance between security and liberty," Dahl said.



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